

Media in the United States

<http://www.globalissues.org/article/163/media-in-the-united-states>

“I challenge anybody to show me an example of bias in Fox News Channel.” — *Rupert Murdoch* (Salon, 3/1/01)

— Quoted by Seth Ackerman, [*The Most Biased Name in News; Fox News Channel's extraordinary right-wing tilt*](#), *Extra! A Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting Special Report*, August 2001

In recent years, the American media has been plagued with all sorts of problems including, sliding profits, scandals about manipulation, plagiarism, propaganda, lower audiences, “dumbing down”, and so on.

Media omissions, distortion, inaccuracy and bias in the US is something acknowledged by many outside the USA, and is slowly realized more and more inside the US. However, those problems have made it very difficult for the average American citizen to obtain an open, objective view of many of the issues that involve the United States (and since the United States is so influential culturally, economically, politically and militarily around the world, they are naturally involved in many issues).

Those with power and influence know that media control or influence is crucial. A free press is crucial for a functioning democracy, but if not truly free, paves the way for manipulation and concentration of views, thus undermining democracy itself.

Free Press Critical for Free, Democratic Society

An essay from the prestigious journal, *Columbia Journalism Review*, notes the crucial role of free media and the need for public education in society to maintain democracy:

In recognition of the role that the press played in the nation's founding, and in appreciation of the crucial role it plays in maintaining a free society, the press was granted special protections under the First Amendment.

But the founders knew that a free press would be worth little if the people could not read it, so public education became one of the great obsessions of the leaders of the early republic. [The problem in Europe at that time] was restricting education to the wealthy, in the mistaken belief that “knowledge is the parent of sedition and insurrection.” Instead, he wrote, education was vital to the maintenance of a free society. This concern with education was widespread in the founding generation, and Thomas Jefferson famously listed the establishment of the University of Virginia as one of the three great accomplishments of his life (he omitted his presidency from the list).

— *Evan Cornog, Let's Blame the Readers, Columbia Journalism Review, Issue 1, January/February 2005*

The idea of “citizenship education” grew from these ideals stressing the education of the American institutions, the value of democracy, thinking critically about their society and their roles in that society etc. But “with business groups looking to schools essentially to educate workers for a complex industrial society” an inherent conflict was brewing.

Thus, “the traditional and primary collective goal of public schools building literate citizens able to engage in democratic practices” [also the goal of American’s founders] was “replaced by the goal of social efficiency, that is, preparing students for a competitive labor market anchored in a swiftly changing economy.” In addition:

This redefinition of citizenship has been part of a larger push toward privatizing much that used to be public — and, in particular, governmental — in American society. For decades the Republican Party and allies in the business community have worked to reduce government’s role in American life. It is a measure of their success that faith in democratic government has largely been replaced by faith in the market. It was the senior President Bush who urged upon the nation a less expansive model of civic engagement... Implicit in this was the notion ... isolated individuals should try to do good — in isolation. Earlier generations had expressed different ideals. In his inaugural address in 1941, as the threat of world war drew ever closer to the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt said that American democracy was strong “because it is built on the unhampered initiative of individual men and women joined together in a common enterprise.” Sixty years later, after the September 11 attacks had shaken the nation, President George W. Bush urged Americans to pull together by going out and spending money, or taking a trip to Disney World. Consumerism had become the common cause.

— *Evan Cornog, Let's Blame the Readers, Columbia Journalism Review, Issue 1, January/February 2005*

(See also this site’s section on the rise in consumerism detailing how politically active citizens in the 1960s were dumbed down and diverted to consumerism.)

The mainstream media too have seen similar transformations. Pressures to make profit require more and more avoidance of controversial and sensitive issues that could criticize aspects of corporate America or reduce the buying moods of readers.

In doing so, much of the agendas are driven by government and business interests, with less criticism. Over time, as people unwittingly get accustomed to a lower quality media, propaganda becomes easier to disseminate.

“a principle familiar to propagandists is that the doctrine to be instilled in the target audience should not be articulated: that would only expose them to reflection, inquiry, and, very likely, ridicule. The proper procedure is to drill them home by constantly presupposing them, so that they become the very condition for discourse.”—*Noam Chomsky*

— Quoted by Scott Burchill, [*The Limits of Thinkable Thought*](#), February 4, 2000

The media is therefore one avenue by which such support and, if needed, manipulation, can be obtained. The US is no exception to this. As the following quote summarizes, the role of the media from the view of politics is often less discussed:

George Seldes, a reporter for over seventy years, points out that there are three sacred cows still with us today: religion, patriotism, and the media itself... Patriotism, defined as taking pride in one's country, allies the masses with the ruling powers. The media refuses to discuss its consistent failure to inform the masses of this ongoing control. It has been in place for so long that few are aware of how it came about or that it is even still there. But many people are intelligent, moral, and idealistic; if the media would discuss the true history of these three sacred cows, that control would quickly disappear.

— J.W. Smith, [*The World's Wasted Wealth 2*](#), (Institute for Economic Democracy, 1994), p. 11.

There are many ways in which the media is used to obtain such support and conformity. The U.S., often regarded as one of the more freer countries with regards to its media, is therefore worth looking at in more detail. This is a large topic so this section will be updated from time to time.

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US Press Freedom

As detailed further on this web site's mainstream media introduction, the US's rankings in the Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders is a lot lower than it is often assumed.

It is normally thought — and expected — that US press freedom would rank top in the world. Yet, for many years, it has been a lot lower than the high expectation. For 2011, the US ranked just 47th. It has been around these low numbers for a number of years, especially during the Bush Administration's "War on Terror".

For a while, under the Obama Administration it was looking better, but recent events such as the various Occupy protest movements and how journalists have been treated has resulted in the recent drops in the rankings. As Josh Stearns from Free Press and the Free Press Action Fund worries, the cherished US First Amendment is being taken for granted.

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Uninformed population means harmful policies can go unaccountable

Many US policies, especially foreign policies, have come under much sharp criticism from around the world as well as from various segments within American society. As a result, some fear that they are running the risk of alienating themselves from the rest of the world. A revealing

quote hints that media portrayal of issues can affect the constructive criticism of American foreign policy:

“One reads about the world’s desire for American leadership only in the United States”, one anonymous well-placed British diplomat recently observed, “Everywhere else one reads about American arrogance and unilateralism.”

— Jonathan Power, [*America is in Danger of Alienating the World*](#), March 3, 1999

The quote above also summarizes how America is viewed in the international community and how some of their actions are portrayed in the United States. Yet, the international community, often for very valid reasons, sees America’s actions differently.

International news coverage from US media is very poor. As noted by the Media Channel and Huffington Post, “According to the Pew Research Center’s recent study of American journalism, coverage of international events is declining more than any other subject. In the study of 2007, 64% of participating newspaper editors said their papers had reduced the space for international news. ‘In a strict sense, the American media did not in 2007 cover the world,’ says the Pew report. Beyond Iraq, only two countries received notable coverage last year — Iran and Pakistan.”

This non-coverage of global issues is worrying because so many American citizens end up getting a narrow view of many important world issues. In such a situation, it is easier for propagandists to say things that are harder to question and seem real.

The majority of US citizens still get their news from television, where limited headlines and sound-bites reduce the breadth, depth and context available. And while the Internet has surpassed traditional newspapers as a prime source of news, the *diversity* of news is still small; a lot of content for Internet sites come from a few traditional sources, usually those working in struggling newspaper companies and media outlets.

As a side note, although the Internet may be surpassing traditional newspapers as information sources, television news still dominates; some 2/3rds of Americans get their news from TV:

Surveys by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press among other polling and research groups show that about two-thirds of the general public cite television as their main source for national and international news, more than twice the number of people who rely on newspapers, and about 50 percent more than the growing number of U.S. residents who rely on the Internet (43 percent).

— Jim Lobe, “*Arab Spring*” *Dominated TV Foreign News in 2011*, Inter Press Service, January 2, 2012

A year after the war on Iraq had started, March 2004 saw a large poll released by the Pew Global Attitudes Project (GAP) from the Pew Research Centre for the People & the Press. It looked at views in a number of countries, including some in western Europe, and some in Muslim

countries, and found in all of them a growing mistrust of the United States, particularly President George Bush.

On many issues there was a wide gap between respondents in the U.S. versus respondents elsewhere, including key ally, Britain. And as the diplomat noted above in 1999, this poll also noted that 61 to 84% of respondents in other countries found the U.S. motives in foreign policy to be self-interested, while 70% of respondents in the United States thought their country did take other's views into account. This divide in perceptions is large to say the least. But why is there such a gap?

Dr. Nancy Snow, an assistant professor of political science describes one of her previous jobs as being a “propagandist” for the U.S. Information Agency. In an interview, she also describes how Americans and the rest of the world often view the American media:

[P]ublic diplomacy is a euphemism for propaganda. In the United States, we don't think of ourselves as a country that propagandizes, even though to the rest of the world we are seen as really the most propagandistic nation in terms of our advertising, in terms of our global reach, our public relations industry—we have more public relations professionals and consultants in the United States than we do news reporters. So there's an entire history of advertising, promoting, and getting across the message of America both within and also outside of the United States.

— Dr. Nancy Snow, [*Propaganda Inc.: Behind the curtain at the U.S.I.A., an Interview with Guerilla News Network*](#)

Australian journalist John Pilger also captures this very well:

Long before the Soviet Union broke up, a group of Russian writers touring the United States were astonished to find, after reading the newspapers and watching television, that almost all the opinions on all the vital issues were the same. “In our country,” said one of them, “to get that result we have a dictatorship. We imprison people. We tear out their fingernails. Here you have none of that. How do you do it? What's the secret?”

— John Pilger, [*In the freest press on earth, humanity is reported in terms of its usefulness to US power*](#), *New Statesman*, 20 February, 2001

While [many countries](#)—if not all—in some way suppress/distort information to some degree, the fact that a country as influential in the international arena such as the United States is also doing it is very disturbing. The people of this nation are the ones that can help shape the policies of the most powerful nation, thereby affecting many events around the world. For that to happen, they need to be able to receive objective reporting.

An integral part of a functioning democracy is that people are able to make informed choices and decisions. However, as the 2000 Election testified, there has been much amiss with the media coverage and discourse in general.

The inappropriate fit between the country's major media and the country's political system has starved voters of relevant information, leaving them at the mercy of paid political propaganda that is close to meaningless and often worse. It has eroded the central requirement of a democracy that those who are governed give not only their consent but their informed consent.

— Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly, Sixth Edition*, (Beacon Press, 2000), p. 192.

(Note that in the above quote, the book was originally published in 1983, but is still relevant to today and applicable to the 2000 Elections in the United States and the various [controversies](#) that accompanied it.)

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US Media and War on Terror

Since the terrible attacks by terrorists on September 11, 2001 in America and the resulting war on terrorism, various things that have happened that has impacted the media as well as the rest of the country.

One example was the appointing of an advertising professional, Charlotte Beers as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. As writer and activist, Naomi Klein pointed out in the *Los Angeles Times* (March 10, 2002), “Beers had no previous State Department experience, but she had held the top job at both the J. Walter Thompson and Ogilvy & Mather ad agencies, and she's built brands for everything from dog food to power drills.” Beers' task now was to “work her magic on the greatest branding challenge of all: to sell the United States and its war on terrorism to an increasingly hostile world” where many nations and people have been critical of American policies. (Beers eventually stepped down in March 2003 due to health reasons.) As Klein also pointed out, the trouble has been that the image to be portrayed is not seen by the rest of the world as necessarily being a fair portrayal:

Most critics of the U.S. don't actually object to America's stated values. Instead, they point to U.S. unilateralism in the face of international laws, widening wealth disparities, crackdowns on immigrants and human rights violations ... The anger comes not only from the facts of each case but also from a clear perception of false advertising. In other words, America's problem is not with its brand — which could scarcely be stronger — but with its product.

— Naomi Klein, [Brand USA](#), *LA Times*, March 10, 2002

The media frenzy in the wake of the “war on terror” has on the one hand led to detailed reporting on various issues. Unfortunately, as discussed on this site's [propaganda](#) page, this has been limited to a narrow range of perspectives and context leading to a simplification of why terrorists have taken up their causes, of the US's role in the world, world opinions on various issues, and so on.

One of the most famous media personalities in American news, Dan Rather of CBS had admitted that there has been a lot of self-censorship and that the U.S. media in general has been [cowed by](#)

[patriotic fever](#) and that accusations of lack of patriotism is leading to the “fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions.”

Under the Bush Administration, the US government has been increasing its secrecy as *Inter Press Service* reports. More and more documents are being marked classified and more propaganda and fear has been employed (as discussed on this site’s war on terror section) to scare the population to support a cut back in their own civil rights for a war on terror. In that context, the lack of mainstream media courage risks further government and corporate media unaccountability.

For more about the war on terror and the attacks on the U.S., see this site’s [war on terror](#) section.

But deeper than self-censorship, has been the systemic and institutional censorship that goes on in the media on all sorts of issues. This has been going on for decades.

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The Mainstream Media Censors Itself

There is no formal censorship in the USA, but there is what some call “Market Censorship” — that is, mainstream media do not want to run stories that will offend their advertisers and owners. In this way, the media end up censoring themselves and not reporting on many important issues, including corporate practices. For some examples of this, check out the [Project Censored](#) web site.

Another effect of these so-called market forces at work is that mainstream media will go for what will sell and news coverage becomes all about attracting viewers. Yet the fear of losing viewers from competition seems so high that many report the exact same story at the very same time! Objective coverage gets a back seat.

A friend of mine [of journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski] was working in Mexico for various US television channels. I met him in the street as he was filming clashes between students and police. I asked “What’s happening here, John?” Without stopping filming he replied: “I don’t have the faintest idea. I just get the shots. I send them to the channel, and they do what they want with them”.

— Ryszard Kapuscinski, [Media as mirror to the world](#), *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1999.

Even honest journalists from the major networks can find that their [stories and investigations may not get aired for political reasons](#), rather than reasons that would question journalistic integrity.

This highlights that market censorship isn’t always a natural process of the way the system works, but that corporate influences often affect what is reported, even in the supposedly freest press of all. Some journalists unwittingly go with the corporate influences while others who

challenge such pressures often face difficulties. John Prestage is also worth quoting on this aspect too:

Even some mainstream journalists are sounding the alarm.... Henry Holcomb, who is president of the Newspaper Guild of Greater Philadelphia and a journalist for 40 years, said that newspapers had a “clearer mission” back when he began reporting. That mission was to “report the truth and raise hell.” But corporate pressures have blurred this vision, he said.

Janine Jackson of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a news media watchdog group, told the American Free Press that 60 percent of journalists surveyed recently by FAIR admitted that advertisers “try to change stories.”

“Some advertisers kill some stories and promote others,” she said, asserting that there is an “overwhelming influence of corporations and advertisers” on broadcast and print news reporting.

“The trends are all bad, worse and worse,” Nichols said. Newspapers and broadcast journalists are under “enormous pressures to replace civic values with commercial values.”

He labeled local television news a “cesspool.” Local broadcasters are under pressure from big corporations to “entertain” rather than to inform, and people are “more ignorant” after viewing television news because of the misinformation they broadcast, he said.

— Jon Prestage, [*Mainstream Journalism: Shredding the First Amendment*](#), *Online Journal*, 7 November 2002

It is not just corporate pressures that can impact the media, but political and cultural pressures, too. For example, Dan Rather was mentioned above noting that journalists were pressured by patriotic fever following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks to resist asking tough questions that might criticize America too much.

At a media conference in March 2007, Dan Rather reiterated his concerns regarding the state of journalism in the US. An article from CNET summarized some of Rather’s key points:

“So many journalists—there are notable exceptions—have adopted the go-along-to-get-along (attitude),” he said.

So, because of this “access game,” journalism has degenerated into a “very perilous state,”

... [Rather] thinks many people have lost faith in journalists [because] questioning power, especially at a time of war, can be perceived as unpatriotic or unsupportive of America’s fighting troops.

— Daniel Terdiman, *Dan Rather: Journalism has “lost its guts”*, *CNET News.com*, March 12, 2007

As Amy Goodman noted many years ago (linked to further below), the press corps that accompanies the White House is often too cozy with the officials, and it is hard to ask tough questions. Dan Rather notes that it is a general problem:

Rather reiterated his feeling that many journalists today—and he repeated that he has fallen for this trap—are willing to get too cozy with people in positions of power, be it in government or corporate life.

“The nexus between powerful journalists and people in government and corporate power,” he said, “has become far too close.”

You can get so close to a source that you become part of the problem, he added. “Some people say that these powerful people use journalists, and they do. And they will use them to the fullest extent possible, right up until the point where the journalist says, ‘Whoa, that’s too far.’”

... [Journalists] shouldn’t be willing to water down the truth to protect their access to power.

— Daniel Terdiman, *Dan Rather: Journalism has “lost its guts”*, CNET News.com, March 12, 2007

And, as also detailed further on this site’s corporate media concentration section, Dan Rather sees consolidation of power as a major problem:

Rather also said that the consolidation of power in a small number of media companies has hurt the search for the truth in newsrooms across the country. As media conglomerates get bigger, the gap between newsrooms and boardrooms grows, and the goal becomes satisfying shareholders, not citizens, he said.

Therefore, Rather supports increased competition between media companies and between journalists.

— Daniel Terdiman, *Dan Rather: Journalism has “lost its guts”*, CNET News.com, March 12, 2007

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Political pressure on media, too

Political bias can also creep in too. Media watchdog, Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) did a [study of ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News and NBC Nightly News](#) in 2001 in which they found that “92 percent of all U.S. sources interviewed were white, 85 percent were male and, where party affiliation was identifiable, 75 percent were Republican.” While of course this is not a complete study of the mainstream media, it does show that there can be heavy political biases on even the most popular mainstream media outlets.

A year-long study by FAIR, of CNN's media show, *Reliable Sources* showed a large bias in sources used, and as their article is titled, CNN's show had [reliably narrow sources](#). They pointed out for example, "Covering one year of weekly programs [December 1, 2001 to November 30, 2002] with 203 guests, the FAIR study found *Reliable Sources*' guest list strongly favored mainstream media insiders and right-leaning pundits. In addition, female critics were significantly underrepresented, ethnic minority voices were almost non-existent and progressive voices were far outnumbered by their conservative counterparts."

In the United States, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is seen as a public-funded alternative to the commercial stations. FAIR claims they have debunked the idea that PBS as a whole leans to the left; "corporate and investment-oriented shows have long made up a large chunk of PBS's news and public affairs programming, while more progressive content has frequently met resistance and censorship at the network," they say. And this is from an introduction to a September/October 2006 report where they describe the results of a study of PBS's flagship news program, *News Hour*, to see if it had any bias or slants, as conservatives often accuse it of having a liberal bias.

They found that PBS was consistent with commercial stations in their biases; 76% of sources were official or "elite" sources; women and people of different ethnicities were far under-represented; Republican sources outnumbered Democratic sources by 66% to 33%; issues such as Iraq, Katrina, and immigration all followed conservative leanings.

In a radio discussion about these findings of PBS's conservative biases, the researchers for the study further noted that those statistics actually did not reflect an even wider bias, whereby for example, most African American people in the period of study were usually discussing Hurricane Katrina, and even then were usually presented as "people on the street," whereas, they noted, "it was typically the white male that would be presented as the experts with solutions."

The discussion also noted that PBS is not like a public service as it is understood in most countries; it requires the program request funding from wealthy individuals and companies that give it backing. Indeed, PBS requires major corporate funding to keep going, and so, the media experts in that discussion implied, did not offer the counter-balance to commercial stations, as they are often believed to provide.

All this also comes out shortly after the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had reports on media concentration's negative impacts on local news destroyed.

At the same time, it was also revealed that the FCC never released another damaging report that the Telecommunications Act of 1996 had similarly reduced the diversity of radio stations throughout the United States.

This concentration results from commercial ownership through buyouts and dominance by the most powerful entities and when those media interests reflect the interests of those in power, as they clearly do, has serious implications for diversity of views, and for a healthy democracy.

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Media Power is Political Power

Concentrated ownership of media results in less diversity. This means that the political discourse that shapes the nation is also affected. And, given the prominence of the United States in the world, this is obviously an important issue. However, politicians can often be hesitant about criticizing the media too much, as the following from Ben H. Bagdikian summarizes:

[M]edia power is political power. Politicians hesitate to offend the handful of media operators who control how those politicians will be presented — or not presented — to the voters. Media political power has always been a fixture in American history. But today the combination of the media industry and traditional corporate power has reached dimensions former generations could not match. ... Today ... political variety among the mainstream media has disappeared. As the country enters the twenty-first century, the news and analyses of progressive ideas and groups are close to absent in the major media. Similarly absent is commentary on dangers of this political one-sidedness to American democracy.

— Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly, Sixth Edition*, (Beacon Press, 2000), pp.xv—xvi

Bagdikian continues in that paragraph to then note how the American media are good at recognizing similar problems with other countries, by pointing to certain New York Times stories as examples. Yet, when it comes to looking at one's self, then that example of good journalism seems to be less likely.

Many other media commentators have pointed this out as well, including, for example, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in their book, *Manufacturing Consent* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1988). In that book, they point out that there are many occasions, where the U.S. mainstream media have been very thorough, critical and in most cases, appropriate, in their look at the media and policies of other nations in geopolitical issues. However, when it comes to reporting on the actions of their own nations in geopolitical issues, reporting often fits a propaganda model that they also defined in their book. This propaganda model isn't necessarily explicit. Sometimes it is very subtle, but comes about through natural interactions of the various pulls and pushes of different political, economic and social aspects that affect decisions on what to report and how. In some countries of course, especially authoritarian regimes, propaganda models may be very explicit.

Chomsky/Herman Propaganda Model

Using their propaganda model, Chomsky and Herman, attempt to demonstrate how “money and power are able to filter out the news, ... marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public.” (see p.2) They continue to then summarize their propaganda model that allows this “filtering” of news to be accomplished, as consisting of the following ingredients:

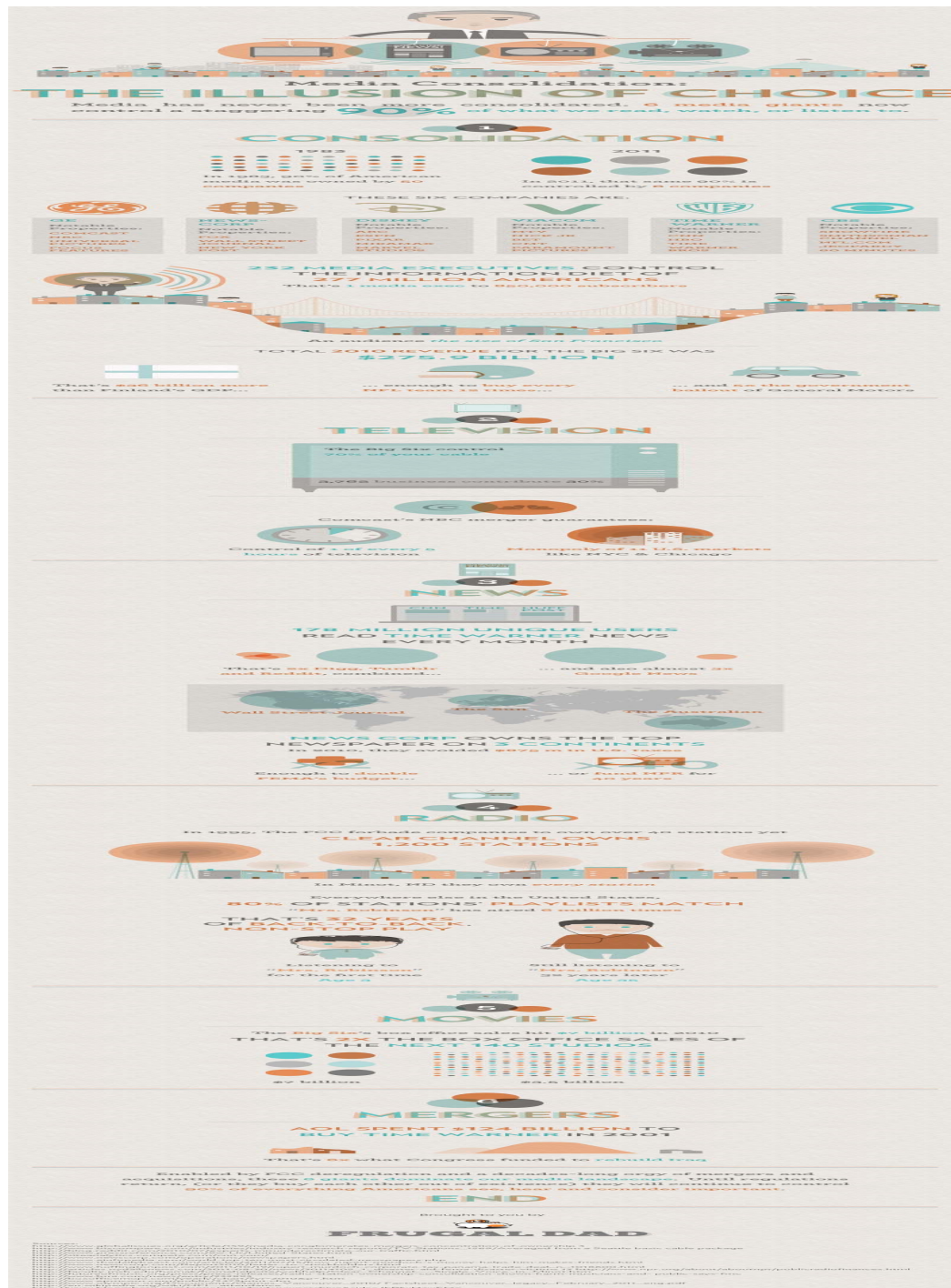
1. Size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms
2. Advertising as the primary income source of the mass media

3. Reliance of the media on information provided by government, business and “experts” funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power
4. “Flak” as a means of disciplining the media
5. “Anticommunism” as a national religion and control mechanism.

Size and concentrated ownership

The issues of concentration in media and its often negative impact on discourse and democracy is discussed in more detail on this sites section on [corporate influence in the media](#).

The blog, FrugalDad, also has this info graphic on the the state of media consolidation in the U.S. noting that “6 media giants now control a staggering 90% of what we read, watch, or listen to”: continued next page.



Advertising as primary income source encourages dumbing down

On the advertising ingredient, Chomsky and Herman also point out that the pressures to show a continual series of programs that will encourage “audience flow” (watching from program to

program so that advertising rates and revenues are sustained) results from advertisers wanting, in general, “to avoid programs with serious complexities and disturbing controversies that interfere with the ‘buying mood.’” (see p. 17.) Documentaries, cultural and critical materials then get a back seat. Others also recognize this as well:

It is no wonder then that media historian Robert McChesney suggests that cutbacks in news and “informational” programs are deliberate because the companies who own and control media want to keep us in our private worlds, cut off from other people’s pain and from too much knowledge about the world. They prefer us tranquilized, pacified, entertained. I have heard him describe in several speeches the mantra of dominant media to ordinary viewers, readers and listeners as simple: “Shut up and shop.”

It is these often unspoken values at the heart of the business culture that undercut the creation of and support for more democratic public interest media.

— Danny Schechter, [*Globalization Limits Media Change*](#), July 26, 2000

[W]ith few exceptions ... programming is carefully noncontroversial, light, and nonpolitical in order to create a “buying mood.” ... If an advertiser is large enough to make the initial payment [for the high costing commercials], each household is reached at a relatively low cost. In the familiar dynamics, this in itself favors the big operator over the small, a contributing factor to the emergence of giantism in the American economy.

— Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly, Sixth Edition*, (Beacon Press, 2000), p. 133

Reliance on official sources and the powerful

On the reliance upon official sources ingredient, Chomsky and Herman point out that because sources such as the government and businesses are often well known, they are deemed reputable and therefore not questioned much. However, when another government offers news items, we are often able to recognize it as possible propaganda, or at least treat it with some scrutiny that requires further verification.

“Flak” as a means of disciplining the media

In terms of flak, Chomsky and Herman point out how various right-wing media watch groups and think tanks were set up in the 80s to heavily criticize anything in the media that appeared to have a liberal or left wing bias and was overly anti-business. It has a profound impact, especially when combined with the corporate ownership, as the following quote highlights:

Corporations have multimillion-dollar budgets to dissect and attack news reports they dislike. But with each passing year they have yet another power: They are not only hostile to independent journalists. They are their employers.

— Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly, Sixth Edition*, (Beacon Press, 2000), p. 65

“Anticommunism” as a national religion and control mechanism

They also point out that the final filter, that of the ideology of anticommunism, is because “Communism as the ultimate evil has always been the specter haunting property owners, as it threatens the very root of their class position and superior status ... [and] helps mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept is fuzzy it can be used against anybody advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodation with Communist states and radicalism. ... If the triumph of communism is the worst imaginable result, the support of fascism abroad is justified as a lesser evil.” (see p. 29.)

This last statement on supporting fascism abroad reflects the support and installing of dictators around the world in places like Latin America, Africa and Asia to support economic interests and anti-communist activities, despite social costs. While of course the Cold War has since ended, this last “ingredient” still survives in other forms like neoliberal economic beliefs, demonization of rogue states and so on. One of the additional effects of this filter has been that during the reporting of conflicts, there has been almost an effect of “[concentrating] on the victims of enemy powers and [forgetting] about the victims of friends” (see p.32.)

Some of the structural causes of the above ingredients are such that they naturally come about, rather than some sort of concerted effort to enforce them by media owners. For example, if a news reporter is critical of a company’s business practices in some ways, and that company is a major advertiser with that media company, then it is obviously not in that media company’s interest to run that story. In a wider sense, any critique or serious examination of say the nations economic policies, or even the global economic policies, that go counter to what the media companies, their owners and advertisers benefit from would also not get as much, if any, discussion. Chomsky and Herman recognize this too:

The elite domination of the media and the marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news “objectively” and on the basis of professional news values. *Within the limits of the filter constraints* they often are objective; the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable. (Emphasis Added)

— *Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent; The Political Economy of the Mass Media*; (Pantheon Books, New York, 1988), p. 2.

Using extensive evidence and sources, they use this propaganda model to examine a number of key world events in recent history that have involved America in some way or another, including situations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, of the KGB-Bulgarian plot to kill the Pope and of the Indochina wars.

It is a truism, often issued with pride by the main media themselves, that the national news has a major impact on the national political agenda. What the main media emphasize is what politicians attend to. Whatever is not given steady emphasis in the news is more safely forgotten

by those who make the laws and regulations. Consequently, the media race for quick and easy profits that pushed the real issues into the shadows has imposed a high cost on American voters: it becomes easier for politicians to distract the public with false or exaggerated issues. ... Continuous repetition and emphasis create high priorities in the public mind and in government. It is in that power — to treat some subjects briefly and obscurely but others repetitively and in depth, or to take initiatives unrelated to external events — where ownership interests most effectively influence the news.

— Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly, Sixth Edition*, (Beacon Press, 2000), pp. xxvii, 16

In this way then, as with other societies, the range of discourse can affect how much is discussed, what is discussed, and to what degree. It is not that there is absolutely no reporting on important issues. For example, the mainstream will report and criticize on issues. However, it is the assumptions that are not articulated that affect how much criticism there will be, or what the context of the reports will be and so on. In that respect, given that there is some critique, we may get the false sense of comfort in the system as working as claimed. Yet it is at the level of these assumptions where the range of discussions get affected. In fact, Noam Chomsky, in another book captures this aspect quite succinctly, while also hinting as to the reason why:

The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate *within* that spectrum — even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time *the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate*. (Emphasis Added)

— Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good*, Odonian Press, 1998

Parenti's Media Monopoly Techniques

Political Scientist and author, Michael Parenti, in an article on [media monopoly](#), also describes a pattern of reporting in the mainstream in the U.S. that leads to partial information. He points out that while the mainstream claim to be free, open and objective, the various techniques, intentional or unintentional result in *systematic* contradictions to those claims. Such techniques — applicable to other nations' media, as well as the U.S. — include:

- [Suppression By Omission](#)»
- [Attack and Destroy the Target](#)»
- [Labeling](#)»
- [Preemptive Assumption](#)»
- [Face-Value Transmission](#)»
- [Slighting of Content](#)»
- [False Balancing](#)»
- [Follow-up Avoidance](#)»
- [Framing](#)»

Buying democracy through campaign financing and how the media benefit

In countries that have representative democracies a problem with election campaigning is that it requires a lot of money, and raising it often means appealing to those who have sufficient money to donate.

In the US, this has led to the criticism that both Democrats and Republicans have had to court big business and do not necessarily represent the majority of the people, as a result.

Such enormous campaign financing has meant that other potentially popular candidates have not been able to get further because they have not been able to spend as much on advertising and marketing.

This means that not only do political parties court big financiers but that these large entities/businesses and wealthy individuals can use the media to push their own agendas and interests which may not necessarily represent majority views.

Numerous calls for limits are welcomed by those without money, but resisted by those with it, for clearly one set of people would gain, while another would lose out.

In the US, activists have been trying to raise the issue of campaign financing for years, but it recently took on another dimension as limits to campaign financing were removed. Kanya D’Almeida recently summarized this in an article in *Inter Press Service*:

The richest one percent has hijacked the very foundations of democracy in a country whose constitution of 1787 promised to be by the people, for the people.

...

[A US Supreme Court ruling in January 2010 that Congress cannot limit spending by corporations in elections] struck at the very heart of what many U.S. citizens have felt for years — that despite a careful constitutional separation of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government, corporate capital had infected the body politic from head to toe.

— Kanya D’Almeida, US: “Money Isn’t Speech, Corporations Aren’t People” , *Inter Press Service*, January 21, 2012

This has also meant it has been hard to find out specific details about campaign financing:

By ruling that the government cannot curb spending and lobbying by unions, corporations or even powerful individual stakeholders, the Supreme Court green-lit the proliferation of Super PACs (political action committees) that are unfettered by electoral laws or transparency and free to pour unprecedented amounts of money into campaigns of their choosing.

Super PACs can also drag their feet on releasing hard data on how much money actually changes hands during election cycles and, in the new arena of impunity granted by the Supreme Court,

can accept donations from registered 501(c) nonprofit entities that are exempt from exposing the identities of those who bankroll elections at will.

Much of this money is funneled directly into TV ads, the bulk of them bordering on smear campaigns against opposing candidates.

— Kanya D’Almeida, US: “Money Isn’t Speech, Corporations Aren’t People”, Inter Press Service, January 21, 2012

In addition to using the media to push their agendas and equally important, the US mainstream media also stands to gain:

According to investment banking and asset management firm Needham and Co., **television stations this year will rake in as much as eight billion dollars from political campaigns.**

— Kanya D’Almeida, US: “Money Isn’t Speech, Corporations Aren’t People”, Inter Press Service, January 21, 2012 [Emphasis added]

In a country that has a lot of concentrated ownership of media, is there a potential conflict of interest; the mainstream media may not have as much interest in discussing these issues in too much depth for they stand to benefit from it.

This site’s section on democracy looks at this in the wider context of democracy including other election challenges.

US Government disseminating prepackaged, even fake news

In March 2005, the *New York Times* revealed that there has been a large amount of fake and prepackaged news created by US government departments, such as the Pentagon, the State Department and others, and disseminated through the mainstream media. The *New York Times* noted a number of important issues including:

- The US Bush administration has “aggressively” used public relations to prepackage news. Issues with this have included that:
 - A number of these government-made news segments are made to look like local news (either by the government department or by the receiving broadcaster);
 - Sometimes these reports have **fake reporters** such as when a “reporter” covering airport safety was actually a public relations professional working under a false name for the Transportation Security Administration”;
 - Other times, there is no mention that a video segment is produced by the government;
 - Where there is some attribution, news stations simply rebroadcast them but sometimes without attributing the source.
- These segments have reached millions;
- This benefits both the government and the broadcaster;
- This could amount to propaganda within the United States as well as internationally.

Effectively, American tax payers have paid to be subjected to propaganda disseminated through these massaged messages.

This issue is covered in more depth on this site's media manipulation section.

Bush Administration Attempts to Manage the Media

The pre-packaged propaganda revelations mentioned above is part of an underlying trend. As the *Observer/Guardian* newspaper in UK writes,

The media is in the midst of a transformation which the Bush administration is keen to foster. They have discovered that a partisan and atomised media can be controlled, manipulated and used to an unprecedented degree.

— Paul Harris, *The mole, the US media and a White House coup*, *The Observer*, February 20, 2005

Furthermore, there is “growing evidence of a White House campaign to bypass or control the media in its everyday presentation of government policy, which included paying one journalist hundreds of thousands of dollars to promote its policies.”

While the article details that one example, they mention many others, including:

- Using actors as fake journalists;
- Fake news stories or propaganda packaged as news;
- Plagiarism and forgeries;
- Paying journalists to design or promote policies;
- And more

Add to those issues the media soul-searching on how they were misled about non-existent Iraq weapons of mass destruction, the media may be coming under a bit more scrutiny.

However, the “extent of the Bush White House's command and control of the press corps is often revealed in the seemingly innocuous White House pool reports” which are filled with minor issues from which nothing substantial can be understood or learned.

(Note though that this issue isn't just with the Bush Administration. The Clinton Administration before him also had problems when it came to press briefings. Award-winning activist/journalist, Amy Goodman, writing back in October 1997 provides interesting insight based on personal experience on what goes on at these press briefings at the White House; why the questions are so similar, why other reporters themselves don't like dissenting or tough questions to the White House, etc. A major problem Goodman concludes is that “a media blockade ... is actually created by the media itself.”)

These attempts by the Bush Administration at “micromanagement” of the media comes with “what appears to be a concerted effort to subvert the mainstream media.”

Administration officials were recently revealed to have paid three senior journalists to promote or design policies....

At the same time, Bush has held fewer Washington press conferences than any of his modern predecessors, while courting local media, such as small city newspapers, which are perceived as easier to steamroll. During last year's election campaign Bush avoided interviews with leading newspapers, such as the Washington Post, but frequently invited reporters from smaller swing state publications to speak with him on Air Force One. Vice-president Dick Cheney took the strategy one step further and banned New York Times reporters from traveling with him.

— Paul Harris, *The mole, the US media and a White House coup*, *The Observer*, February 20, 2005

Weakening Democracy by Stifling Debate

Another way large media companies can exert power and political influence is in their ownership and copyrighting and choosing when to grant rights to others to use their material. As an example, President George Bush, who rarely does press conferences and television interviews, was interviewed by NBC's Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*. In that interview, Bush unconvincingly defended his decision to go to war on Iraq. When a documentary producer wanted to use the clip, NBC denied permission, even though these were the words of a public figure. This raised a number of inter-related issues in one go:

- Larger media organizations and politicians can attempt to hide behind copyright law (although the documentary producer in this example used the clip under "Fair Use" copyright clause anyway);
- While NBC claimed to be neutral by not allowing others to use the clip, it was more like censorship for no-one was able to use the clip;
- An aspect of democracy is thus weakened by corporate media stifling wider debate.

Wired magazine captures this well:

Many are concerned about the ever-expanding reach of copyright law. More are concerned about the ever-increasing concentration of the media.... As media becomes more concentrated, competition to curry favor with politicians only increases. This intensifies during an election cycle. Networks able to signal that they will be "friendly"—for example, by ensuring that embarrassing moments from interviews won't be made available to others—are more likely to attract candidates for interviews and so on, than networks that don't. Concentration tied to copyright thus gives networks both the motive and the means to protect favored guests.

NBC insists it is remaining "neutral" by denying others use of the interview. But there's nothing neutral about restricting either critics or supporters from repeating the president's words. But the issue here isn't really NBC's motive. It is the president's. Why would any president allow a network to copyright his message? No self-respecting president would speak at a club that excluded women: Whatever rights a private organization may enjoy, a president stands for equality. So why did the current leader of the free world, who rarely holds press conferences, agree to speak on a talk show that refuses to license on a neutral basis the content he contributed?

Is vigorous debate over matters as important as going to war less important than protecting his image?

This question is crucial, and thus Greenwald [the documentary producer] has decided to defend his fair use right, even if it means staring down a bunch of lawyers in court. The argument: It's hard to tell "the whole truth" about the Iraq war when you censor bits of that truth because a network tells you to. But what this incident demonstrates most is what many increasingly fear. Concentrated media and expansive copyright are the perfect storm not just for stifling debate but, increasingly, for weakening democracy as well.

— Lawrence Lessig, *Copyrighting the President*, Wired Magazine, August 2004

Another example is on how some fundamental issues are discussed in the wake of the September 11 attacks:

...after the September 11 attacks had shaken the nation, President George W. Bush urged Americans to pull together by going out and spending money, or taking a trip to Disney World. Consumerism had become the common cause.

President Bush also declared that younger Americans should be taught to respond to the September 11 crisis, but his vision of how this should be done was very narrow. In announcing an effort to strengthen citizenship education in the wake of the attacks, Bush said the program's purpose was to teach that "America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people." The goal was to prescribe, not to explore, what American citizenship is and means. And those who challenge their students to ask the hard questions are encountering difficulties. One Florida teacher who asked his class to discuss Benjamin Franklin's statement "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety" was disciplined by the school's principal for his departure from the required curriculum. Answers are safe; questions are not.

— Evan Cornog, *Let's Blame the Readers*, Columbia Journalism Review, Issue 1, January/February 2005

It isn't just stifling debate that threatens democracy, but actively and knowingly distorting information.

Fox News has long been identified by FAIR and others for not just being conservative but openly hostile and even supportive of racist and other extreme views all defensible by free speech. Since President Obama has become President, the hostilities appear to have increased.

30 reasons why Fox News is not legit, Media Matters, October 27, 2009

As media watchdog, Media Matters says, Fox News is not news; it is a 24/7 political operation.

And Media Matters argues that the rest of the US mainstream media are not holding Fox to account:

“So, Fox News has altered the game by unchaining itself from the moral groundings of U.S. journalism. And guess what? There is no industry shame being rained down on the outlet. The rest of the press not only doesn’t complain, it *defends* Fox News and even apologizes on its behalf” (emphasis original).

(See also Alternet.org’s media section for more on this issue.)

Claiming a Liberal Bias to Create a Right-Wing Bias?

Harris also makes an interesting observation; that the right-wing in US politics have long attempted to portray the mainstream media as having a liberal bias. Yet,

- The world over, it is well-recognized that the US media bias is very right wing (increasingly so in recent years), especially when it comes to issues of power and economics;
- Furthermore, the constant barrage of accusations of liberal bias has made the mainstream become even more conservative just to prove that they are not liberal, thus almost creating a self-fulfilling prophecy!

President George Bush himself subtly took part in this casting of liberal bias shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks when he was boarding a helicopter carrying a book under his arm where the title was clear to see. That book was *Bias* by Bernard Goldberg, (Regnery Publishing, Inc, February 2001) which attempted to detail liberal bias in the media. (See criticism of *Bias* from MediaChannel.org’s Danny Schechter.)

Another article from the Guardian around 2001 commented on this whole issue quite bluntly:

One of the conservative movement’s strokes of genius has been to invest a fortune in persuading the rest of the nation of the existence of a beast called the “liberal media”. This is, from a conservative standpoint, extremely useful nonsense.

— Eric Alterman, *The right sort*, *The Guardian*, December 15, 2001

As Noam Chomsky commented some time ago:

In the west, 10 or 20 years, there has been massive research documenting the fact that the media are extraordinarily subordinated to external power. Now, when you have that power, the best technique is to ignore all of that discussion, ignore it totally, and to eliminate it, by the simple device of asserting the opposite. If you assert the opposite, that eliminates mountains of evidence demonstrating that what you are saying is false. That’s what power means. And the way we assert the opposite is by just saying that the media are liberal.

— Noam Chomsky, *The Myth Of The Liberal Media*, documentary, April 1999 (link is no longer available)

With such a vacuum created in US media, Harris notes the dramatic rise of political “blogging”, where ordinary people write blogs, or web logs and online journals. A number of these,

especially during the last US elections were very virulent and right wing, with some reaction slowly coming from the left too, possibly suggesting a trend towards partisan journalism, as opposed to a free press.

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Hurricane Katrina — Rejuvenating the Mainstream Media?

It has not gone unnoticed by many that the American mainstream media has become more critical of power in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the poor response of authorities and George Bush in its aftermath. Many have wondered if this finally means the mainstream media will do what it is supposed to: provide a quality service, critiquing claims rather than simply reporting them, and fundamentally, allowing people to make informed decisions.

Media watchdog FAIR is guarded in its optimism noting that not all reporting has been that good. In addition:

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a more aggressive press corps seems to have caught the White House public relations team off-balance — a situation the White House has not had to face very often in the last five years. Many might wonder why it took reporters so long; as Eric Boehlert wrote in Salon.com (9/7/05):

It's hard to decide which is more troubling: that it took the national press corps five years to summon up enough courage to report, without apology, that what the Bush administration says and does are often two different things, or that it took the sight of bodies floating facedown in the streets of New Orleans to trigger a change in the press's behavior.

— *Covering Katrina: Has a More Critical Press Corps Emerged?, Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting, September 9, 2005*

And MediaChannel.org is hoping that people can keep up the pressure on the mainstream media to continue providing improved, critical reporting.

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Cultural Bias

Cultural bias (as with perhaps any country) has an effect on how something is reported as well.

For example, look at how we in [Europe and USA perceive the Muslim/Islamic world](#) and [the “threat” of Islam](#), due to media concentration on certain aspects of the news. (Since writing the above, around 1999, we of course have witnessed a horrible series of terrorist attacks on the U.S. The resulting war on terror and various attitudes towards the Muslim world has also become negative too. For more on these issues see this site's [war on terror](#) section.)

The USA media coverage of [President Clinton's historic tour of Africa](#) (the first tour by an American President) came under a bit of scrutiny. The previous link mentions how some right-winged politicians made comments on TV about how embarrassed they were when Clinton made some unofficial "apologies" relating to black slavery. Instead, they blamed Africans for the slave trade!

America has also had to contend with the legacy of the Cold War. An ideological battle that required a "counter" propaganda effort against communist propaganda. Propaganda battles often involve over-simplifying. Furthermore, the decades of this meant generations were indoctrinated into a specific way of thinking. As such, even though the Cold War is now over, the mainstream struggles to rid itself of those ways of thinking and talking; whether it is how the rest of the world is viewed, or whether cherished principles and issues are oversimplified, it permeates throughout media and culture.

Referring to Ben Bagdikian's work again, he also details how subtle forms of specific cultural reinforcement are made by corporate demands on advertising. For example,

- To show certain types of imagery that is beneficial to their ability to sell products, corporations will demand for that inclusion of the following ideas appear in programs around their ads (for brevity, some of the ideas have been skipped in the quote): "All business men are good, or if not, are always condemned by other businessmen. All wars are humane. The status quo is wonderful. ... The American way of life is beyond criticism." (see p.154).
- He then continues to point out that it isn't just in advertisements that these images are made, but that corporations also demand that "independent" news reporting, editorial content etc also have such ideas expressed (see p.154).
- Furthermore, he also mentions that "[i]f audiences were told that the ideas represented explicit demands of corporations who advertised, the messages would lose their impact." (See p. 155).
- And, while there is room for wider description of events and ideas in the media, he says that there are limits to this latitude. For example, he says that the "most obvious limit is criticism of the idea of free enterprise or of other basic business systems" and that while there may be cases of specific criticisms of corporate activities, the actual structural system beneath, itself is not criticized, just, as he points out, how in the former Soviet Union, criticism of communism would not be possible. (See p.155).